

SECTION 8: PERSISTENCE AND RETENTION

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1. Introduction

Adults who make a personal investment in their learning deserve high-quality services that best meet their needs. Attending an adult education program is often a choice, and adults make considerable sacrifices to attend. If the student feels that the program is not helping them achieve their goals or feels the program is not structured to meet their goals, they may decide their personal sacrifice is not worth it and drop out. This section will provide program directors with tools to develop a retention plan.

2. Definitions

The definition of persistence in adult education is: *adults staying in programs as long as they can, engaging in self-directed study if they have to drop out of their program, and returning to the program as soon as the demands of their lives allow (Comings et al).*

The definition of retention in adult education is retaining the student long enough for the student to achieve their goals.

Five types of adult students in adult education programs:

1. **Persisters:** students who are currently enrolled and attending frequently
2. **Completers:** students who have achieved their purpose for attending class and have moved on to new goals
3. **Pretenders:** students who are currently enrolled but not attending regularly
4. **Withdrawers:** students who have left the program for a reason beyond the program's control
5. **Dropouts:** students who have left for minor reasons

3. Barriers to Student Retention

Student Barriers

When new students enter the program, it is important to ask questions that will identify barriers to program participation and special needs, as well as identify the students' learning strengths. New students should be assured at the onset that perceived barriers or learning problems need not prohibit them from setting and reaching learning goals. A process should be in place to address these barriers and revisit these barriers periodically.

Many of the students will also need a great deal of attention before they can satisfy their need to belong in the program or can improve their self-esteem. Establishing rapport with the student can sometimes be accomplished at the onset by spending private time with each new student to discuss problems and solutions as well as how to use strengths to compensate for weak areas. Often students are not aware of their strengths and how these can positively impact their learning capacity. By identifying their preferred learning styles, you will know what type of input needs to be provided in your classroom so that they can be successful students.

Your initial contact with new students can be decisive in determining individuals' attitudes toward the program and whether they will remain in the program long enough to complete their goals.

Types of Student Barriers Forces Supporting or Hindering Persistence

Dispositional Barriers

Students sometimes have low self-esteem, memories of prior academic failure, or negative feelings about past school experiences, (**dispositional barriers**) which impact on their retention during the first few weeks of class.

Institutional Barriers

Students may see inconvenient hours of operation, inaccessible locations, attendance/re-entry policies, unclear procedures, etc. (**institutional barriers**) as interfering with their ability to attend adult education.

Situational Barriers

Students may have problems with family, health care, finances, legal, transportation, child care; lack of free time; changes in work schedules or legal issues; etc. (**situational barriers**) which interfere with regular school attendance.

Emotional-relational Barriers

Students may allow the opinions of friends and family members (fear of social disapproval) to influence their decision to attend the adult education program.

Students may lack the organizational, motivational, and problem-solving skills (sometimes due to learning disabilities) necessary for consistent participation in educational programs.

When students decide to enter the adult education program, they have many questions and concerns. They want to know how this will be different from their past educational experiences.

Sometimes the adult student only begins to think about these barriers after they have started attending the program. Unless someone helps them to identify potential barriers and solutions, these students may abandon the program before they ever get started.

Listed below are barrier identification questions (about problems with transportation, scheduling, child care, health, etc.) that will help you assist the students in identifying potential problems and developing a plan to address them.

1. Was school difficult for you? Why?
2. Do you think you have trouble learning new information or new skills? If so, what kinds of things do you have trouble with?
3. Do you feel you are easily distracted?
4. Have you ever had special help or special classes? If so, what kind? Where?
5. Do you have problems with your vision (eyes)?
6. Do you have problems with your hearing (ears)?
7. Do you have other problems or disabilities that make studying or working difficult? What kind? Do you have documentation of a disability? Would you like to request any special accommodations?
8. What could make it difficult for you to come to class?
 - ☐ My work schedule
 - ☐ Finding transportation
 - ☐ Finding child care
 - ☐ Other: _____

After screening is completed, discuss present barriers and potential barriers. There are many agencies that can assist with a variety of needs including food, shelter and transportation.

Offer to assist students if additional barriers or learning problems present themselves later on. Encourage students to be proactive and ask for support when it is necessary.

4. Structuring the Program for Retention

For many adult students, returning to an educational environment is a significant endeavor. There are many factors which might make adult students hesitant to attend the program:

- out of school for many years
- less-than-positive memories of their school years
- too old to learn or that they don't know how to learn
- afraid that family and friends will make fun of them

**Fear of the unknown
might also make students
hesitant to attend.**

It is important to remember that not all adult students will know what to expect when they return to school.

Environment:

Suggestions for creating a welcoming **environment**:

- Provide a welcoming atmosphere. For example, a greeting at the door, interesting posters on the wall, neat and clean facilities, a tour for new students, a comfortable learning space (chair, desk, table, etc.), a variety of learning options (quiet space, group work, music/no music).
- Ensure that all services are offered using an adult student-centered model of delivery.
- Ensure that students are treated with warmth and respect at all times.
- Ensure that a non-judgmental environment is provided in which the choices and backgrounds of students are honored.
- Have coffee, tea and refreshments available.
- Hold social events for students and teachers.
- Offer appropriate field trips and/or team building activities.
- Encourage student involvement in all aspects of the program including fundraising, or joining committees.
- Provide training to staff and instructors in the importance of having a friendly, nurturing environment.
- Review program rules and policies with the students so there are no surprises later: program start time, finishing time, expectations, break times, smoking rules, absenteeism, etc.

Student Goals

Setting Clear Goals and Expectations

Helping students to set short-term goals where they can quickly experience success is a useful **retention strategy**.

Helping Students Recognize Progress

Adult students need to know they are making progress. They have busy, demanding lives and they need to know that the time and effort they are investing in instruction is paying off. Otherwise, why should they stay?

Adults need ongoing feedback from instructors as well as concrete demonstrations that they are making progress. For progress to occur, instructors and students must together set clear and realistic short and long-term goals. Effective assessment will ensure placement at the proper level. Placement at the proper level directly relates to the ability to make progress.

In order to encourage students right from the beginning, instructors should also build in opportunities for students to experience success early on in the learning process. Setting short-term, realistic, manageable goals can help students to see progress in a relatively short period of time. In fact, ongoing encouragement, support and reinforcement from instructors regarding to progress will greatly assist with retention.

Instructors should continually review goals with students and acknowledge and celebrate student progress on an ongoing basis. The instructor should also work with the students to revise their goals as needed.

Students, particularly those at the lowest literacy levels, need to feel that they are progressing towards their goals. By setting short-term reachable goals they will be able to see their progress on a regular basis. Individualized learning plans should outline specific skills that students can work on and see progress. Each lesson plan should give students and tutors an opportunity to review the progress that has been made not only during the lesson, but also over time.

To encourage progress, you can also talk about what leads to learning success, not only in class but in any educational environment, workplace or other real-life setting. Essentially, instructors should provide support to help students learn.

Reward Students for Meeting Goals

In order to increase student confidence, recognize and celebrate student success on an ongoing basis. Since progress is so important to student retention, plan to recognize and celebrate student achievement. Instructors may need to consider whether their efforts in this area need to be increased.

Progress can be celebrated and recognized in many ways. Both formal and informal recognition is important. For example, it is very easy to make certificates of achievement. These can be awarded when students reach their goals, but they can also be awarded along the way as new skills are mastered or when a particular accomplishment is noticed.

You can reward or acknowledge progress in small, less formal ways too. For example, telling a student that you noticed an improvement in his or her literacy skills might just make someone's day! If your program has a newsletter, you can document student achievements there.

Student Involvement

The needs of adult students should be the focus for decisions and program activities. It is helpful if students are active participants in their education. It is also beneficial to continually gather student feedback on program operations.

Student involvement in the program builds ownership, commitment and self-esteem. It motivates and inspires the students. All of these outcomes directly help with retention. Student involvement also gives students valuable experience that can help them in a job search or with their future educational or personal goals.

Students can be involved in many ways including:

- Serving on boards and committees
- Providing orientation to new students
- Providing peer support to fellow students
- Speaking to the community about literacy issues
- Writing newspaper articles
- Writing a student newsletter
- Contributing to a book of student stories
- Providing information to the program about what is working and what needs to be improved
- Serving on an adult student group to support students and provide input into program operations
- Participating in social events to build community and support other students
- Fundraising

Current and former students can be a wonderful source of information. Through informal discussions, a survey or a focus group, you could ask questions about retention issues and potential program improvements such as:

- Do you have ideas about how we can better support you or other students?
- What books, materials, resources, software, etc. do you find most useful?
- What learning activities work best for you?
- What is the most difficult thing about attending our program and what could we do to help with this?
- Have you ever thought about quitting? Why? What made you decide to stay?

You will surely get some great suggestions (after all, students are the experts!) or you may notice some overall patterns or needs. You can then adjust programming, learning approaches and materials as you are able and as needed.

Develop a Retention Team and Retention Plan

Keep in mind retention issues when doing regular program planning. Often, the focus is on efforts to recruit students into programs. However, it is equally important to think about how to ensure that students will want to stay in your program and how you can help them do so. Retention needs consistent thought and attention. It does not just happen.

In addition, talking about retention issues doesn't always have to be a formal activity; it's also important to take time to talk informally to students and colleagues about ways the program can encourage and support students to stay and work towards meeting their goals.

To help ensure a focused approach, try creating a retention team made up of a staff, students and volunteers to brainstorm and plan for retention.

Suggestions for a retention team:

1. Program director
2. Instructors and aides
3. Current students
4. Former students
5. Volunteers
6. KYAE Program Support Associate

Create a retention binder:

1. Student welcome letters
2. Student survey
3. Student contracts and absence form
4. Classroom rules
5. Student progress charts
6. Assessment samples
7. Classroom responsibilities
8. Certificates
9. Student recognition letters
10. Retention tips

Suggested responsibilities for the team include:

1. To identify problems that could lead to dropping or stopping out
2. To provide encouragement to build student confidence and sustain motivation
3. To assist students with problem-solving techniques
4. To refer students to appropriate services
5. To assist with intervention strategies

Collaborating with Other Community Service Providers

No matter how hard we might try, no one organization can fully meet everyone's needs. Part of being student-centered means developing strong linkages with other community organizations and services. Know what services are available in your community and what their mandates, missions and current requirements are in order to better serve students.

5. Structuring the Learning Environment for Retention

Quality Instruction

Receiving high quality instruction that is relevant to the goals and needs of students is a critical part of retention. Key components of quality instruction include:

- Skilled, caring instructors
- Effective initial and ongoing assessment
- The use of sound adult education principles
- The use of effective instructional strategies
- The use of effective learning materials and resources
- Knowledge of some of the major barriers to learning such as learning disabilities
- Knowledge of ways to encourage learning such as the use of learning styles and multiple intelligences
- Having an awareness of the unique needs of each student in order to tailor instruction and learning materials to his or her needs
- Holding regular “check ins” with students to find out which learning activities and materials were the most helpful for them

Instructor Characteristics

Quality instruction is not enough to retain students. The teacher credentials are a “given,” but a quality adult education program must view students in a holistic manner. Not only are their educational needs important, but their emotional, environmental, and vocational needs must be also addressed if students are to remain in your program.

Effective and successful adult education instructors should possess specific characteristics both instructional and affective in nature, which are necessary to form the foundation of a quality adult education program and to maintain its integrity and effectiveness.

Adult education instructors should:

- Be sensitive
- View teaching as a relationship
- Be supportive
- Be aware of his/her nonverbal behavior
- Be an “active” listener
- Utilize community support services

Learning Disabilities

Research tells us that in adult literacy programs, between 30 and 60% of participants may have some kind of learning disability. Adult education instructors should have some understanding of learning disabilities, of how they affect learning, and of how to teach and provide support to students whom they suspect have learning disabilities. Learning disabilities are an extremely complex topic. For additional information contact, the Senior Associate for Curriculum and Instruction, at 502-573-5114, ext. 215.

Three of the most common learning disabilities are:

- Visual processing
- Auditory processing
- Organizational

Learning Styles

Everyone has a style of learning that best suits their needs. Some of us prefer to learn by hearing about something, some of us prefer to read about it on our own, some of us need to see the information (on a slide, flipchart or blackboard for example), and some of us need to physically do or touch something to learn about it. While there are many different learning styles, generally they are grouped into the three main areas of visual, auditory and tactile (or kinesthetic).

While everyone has a way of learning that is most helpful and natural to them, often we are not formally aware of what is our preferred way to learn. Assessing learning styles can be extremely helpful. When practitioners know which style best suits a student, they can tailor materials and activities to the learning style that is most suited to each student. When students understand which learning style best meets their needs, learning becomes easier and less intimidating. They may also come to understand why learning may have been so difficult in the past. All of these benefits may in turn increase retention.

It can also be important for instructors to understand our own learning styles. After all, our teaching styles are directly impacted by our learning styles.

Check out the following Web site for free information and tools to help you understand and use learning styles effectively:

“LEARNING STYLES ONLINE” for: www.learning-styles-online.com

Peer Tutoring, Study Groups and Support Groups

Research shows how valuable it is to provide opportunities for adult students to share their experiences. This opportunity helps students stay in programs since sharing experiences helps people deal with day-to-day challenges and barriers as well as build friendships and support. It reduces isolation and encourages teamwork, communication and problem solving skills. It can also give adult students a strong sense of belonging to a community.

Peer tutoring helps in two important ways. First, it helps the student providing the peer tutoring as he or she is reviewing learning material with someone else and is therefore “learning twice”. In addition, being a peer tutor can be a great confidence booster. Second, peer tutoring helps the students receiving support because it is provided one-on-one on an as needed basis at the pace needed by the student. A peer can also relate to specific student needs and issues. Peer groups usually involve a more experienced student helping another student to learn.

Study groups are groups of students working together on learning materials. These groups can either be formally or informally arranged and they can be short-term or long-term, depending on the needs of the group. They could include “study buddies”, a study circle or a group of adults working on an assignment or homework together.

Student support groups are set up based on the needs of the students in your program. Such groups could provide general peer support and encouragement to other students. They could also be more specific and be set-up around a particular issue, for example a support group for single parents or a job seeking club.

6. Motivating the Adult Student

Motivation inspires adults to begin learning and encourages them to continue the learning process. The power of motivation cannot be underestimated. Adults learn best when they are motivated to do so. Motivation may come from within, or a critical event may trigger it. Motivation can be provided externally by family, friends, a community organization, social agency, the workplace or other sources. An understanding of student motivation

should play a significant role in determining the strategies that you use to retain students. Motivation is very powerful – after all, how many of us procrastinate or simply avoid things that we simply do not want to do? Wanting to do something makes accomplishing a task so much more meaningful and achievable!

Encourage your instructors to build on student motivation by:

- Ensuring that learning is relevant to student goals
- Pointing out successes
- Providing regular acknowledgement of hard work and achievements
- Encouraging students to take on new challenges
- Encouraging students to increase their level of involvement with the program

7. At-risk students

At-risk adults are often difficult to identify. See the *At-risk Student Identification Chart and Intervention in the references and resources section adapted from the Ontario Adult Literacy Program in Canada*. The list contains the characteristics associated with specific groups of students and the appropriate interventions.

Identifying Students That Are Likely to Leave the Program

This section discusses some intervention strategies to incorporate into your program during these specific “dropout times”. There are specific times students are likely to drop (or stop) out of an adult education program.

Specific Times Students are Likely to Dropout and Intervention Strategies

After the first meeting because of panic over the threatening prospect of failure

- Involve students quickly.
- Identify the value and importance of the program.
- Set expectations – let students know what they can expect from you and from the program, and let them know what you expect from them.
- Establish rapport.
- Set realistic goals.
- Reveal something about yourself so students can see you as a “normal” person.
- Establish the climate of the class – starting time, breaks, etc.
- Introduce the content/syllabus.

Within the first three weeks

- Assign a team project early in the semester so students will have a “role” other than “studying for the GED”.
- Set up a buddy system so students can contact each other about assignments and to study together.
- Take pictures of students and post in the classroom.
- Track attendance on a chart and post in the classroom.
- Organize. Give visible structure by posting the day’s “menu” on the chalkboard.
- Place a suggestion box in the rear of the room and encourage students to make written comments every time the class meets.
- Place a “Dear Abby mailbox” in an isolated area of the room. Draw one each day to discuss as a group.
- Have students keep journals regarding their experiences in the class.
- Make appointments with all students to review goals, content, any concerns.
- Hand out wallet-sized telephone cards with important telephone numbers listed: main office of facility, local job service, shelter, food pantry, clothing pantry, doctors, etc.
- Have students evaluate the program to determine if you and the program continue to meet their needs and wants.

Within three to nine months when they reach their “plateau of progress”

- Give students daily assignments – “homework”.
- Assign students a classroom responsibility so they acquire a feeling of ownership and purpose – bulletin board, attendance tracking chart, calling non-attendees, etc.
- Re-assess academic level – introduce them to “life after GED” i.e. vocational school and community college offerings, financial aid information, etc.
- Schedule family-program conferences (similar to parent-teacher conferences) so the student’s family can become familiar with what “mom and/or dad” are doing while “in school”.

After the holidays or during periods of inclement weather

- Send postcards or call students to invite them back to class.
- Schedule a guest speaker for the first meeting after a long break and notify students of this.
- Schedule a special project or begin a mini-class series after these periods of time, and notify students of these plans.

Remember, it is at these times when another Needs Assessment should be implemented – this time implement the assessment within the classroom. Remember that assessment of needs is an ongoing process of discovering what your program’s participants want in terms of activities and services.

8. Retention Strategies

Some Ideas for Maintaining Good Rapport:

- Help student set realistic goals and make sure these goals are clear to the student and to you.
- Make sure the student knows what he can expect from the program.
- Give immediate feedback.
- Approach learning with a “*One day at a time*” mindset.
- Follow-up on repeated absentees – phone calls, postcards, surveys, fliers, etc.
- Minimize competition.
- Provide frequent breaks.
- Provide incentives i.e. coupons to local businesses, etc.
- Use student’s name when addressing him/her.
- Arrange room so that it is conducive for learning.
- Provide adequate light and temperature control.
- Create sensory experiences.
- Maximize ability and readiness to learn based upon the time of day. Research suggests that 10 a.m. is peak learning time for adults.
- Have students complete evaluations on the program to determine if you are still meeting their needs and wants.
- Listen actively to your students.
- Deal with crises effectively – don’t minimize – don’t attempt to solve.
- Provide a beginning and an end to instruction.
- Enlist students as “helpers” within your program.
- Have a Friday discussion on the “Problem of the Week.”
- Create individualized learning plans.
- Discuss and make plans to support new students on an ongoing basis.

- Develop a strong communication strategy with students to help avoid dropout.
- Build the sense of community that is essential to student retention.

Some Fun Activities You Can Incorporate Into Your Program:

- Celebrate holidays, birthdays, and special occasions.
- Have one day a week/month where students can bring snacks.
- Allow students to design, edit and publish a monthly newsletter of program events, success stories, and accounts of their lives.
- Schedule frequent student activities (i.e. college trips, guest speakers, etc.)
- Plan informal and formal recognition events.
- Utilize a mentor or buddy system.
- Utilize alumni as tutors, aides, speakers, recruiters.
- Form a Retention Team comprised of instructors, aides, students, counselors, etc.
- Provide a “membership card” to students indicating they are a member of the team.
- Vary the curriculum:
 - Measurement Exercises i.e. measure windows and room, convert recipes to double, etc.
 - “Plan a Trip Booklet” with activities (figuring mileage, accommodation and meal costs, flying vs. driving costs, etc.)
 - Grocery store activities i.e. reading labels, figuring cost per ounce, deciding which is best – bulk or single, list the nutritional values of junk food vs. healthy food, cost per week/month of non-edible purchases, etc.
 - Create daily/weekly/monthly schedule of household tasks and activities.

Some Program-Related Activities You Can Incorporate into Your Program:

- Vary your delivery system.
- Provide relevant instruction and meaningful curriculum.
- Regard teaching as a “relationship.”
- View learning as a verb – an ongoing process.
- Begin and end class on time.

- Arrange materials and tasks from simple to complex.
- Provide an opportunity for students to practice learned skills.
- Minimize competition.
- Provide career counseling.
- Develop a student retention team comprised of volunteers, alumni, and/or teacher aides.
- Participate in staff development activities to maintain up-to-date methods and procedures.
- Discuss a possible “Plan B” for home study in case the student has to “stop out” of the program temporarily: PLATO (certified Distance Education Instructors only); have student write weekly letters to you; magazine or newspaper assignments; crossword puzzles/word search; library activities, etc.

Retention strategies were adapted from the following resources:

[Staying the Course: Factors Influencing Enrollment and Persistence in Adult Education](#) PDF

By Michelle Tolbert, MPR Associates; funded by the U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

Examines who enrolls and does not enroll in adult education programs, identifies subpopulations needing assistance with basic skills, and describes promising practices used by programs to target subpopulations and to motivate and retain students.

[Learner Persistence in Adult Basic Education](#) PDF

Updated May 2006. 389 pages. This Study Circle guide addresses issues of student persistence, motivation and retention in adult basic education (ABE). Based on findings from the NCSALL Adult Student Persistence Study, participants engage in an examination of their own interests and experiences with student motivation and retention and examine strategies of other practitioners.

9. Calculating Persistence and Retention

An Easy Method for Calculating Retention Rates:

STEP 1: Identify the students (ABE, ESL, gender, teacher) who entered the program that you want to track over time.

STEP 2: Count the total number of students enrolled in the class during that period of time.

STEP 3: Count the total number of students who either completed the class or are still enrolled at the end of the time frame.

STEP 4: Divide the total number of students from item 3 by the total number of students in item 2.

STEP 5: Change your decimal to a percentage.

Example:

Thirty students enrolled in Ms. Quire's class during the first week of school.

At the end of the first nine weeks, 4 students had completed the class and 5 students were continuing their work.

Divide 9 by 30 and the retention rate = .30 or 30%.

10. References and Resources

References

Adult Education Handbooks and Guides from Other States

California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project

- Adult Education Administrator's Guide
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ae/ir/documents/aehandbook2005.pdf>

Indiana Department of Education/ Division of Adult Education

- Program Director Handbook
http://www.doe.state.in.us/adulted/admin_handbook.html
- Instructor Handbook
http://ideanet.doe.state.in.us/adulted/teacher_handbook.html
- Media Kit
http://ideanet.doe.state.in.us/adulted/pdf/admin_mediakit.pdf

Massachusetts Department of Education/ Adult Education

- Adult Basic Education Guide
<http://www.doe.mass.edu/acls/abeguide.pdf>

Maine Adult Education

- Director's Handbook
<http://mainegov-images.informe.org/education/aded/dev/handbook/DirectorUs%20Handbook04.pdf>

Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy and Learning (TCALL)

- Teacher Toolkit
<http://www-tcall.tamu.edu/toolkit/contents.html>
- Program Director
<http://www-tcall.tamu.edu/texaslearns/05admanual/cover.htm>

West Virginia Adult Basic Education (WVABE)

- Program Director
http://www.wvabe.org/misc_pdf/Admin_Technical_Assistance_Guide.pdf
- Instructor Handbook
<http://wvabe.org/teacherhandbook.htm>